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AUTHOR	Perrone, Vito
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ABSTRACT

This ERIC Digest was adapted from the Association for Childhood Education International's (ACEI) 1991 position paper on standardized testing. Since the publication of "A Nation at Risk" in 1983, standardized testing programs have expanded greatly. Tests may be of pencil-and-paper or performance-oriented varieties. The purposes of tests include determination of children's placement in gifted programs and grade advancement. Teachers feel compelled to spend time preparing children to take tests in spite of the fact that few teachers believe that a given child's intelligence can be accurately represented by standardized tests. Reasons for caution in the use of tests include the possible loss of children's self-esteem, the distortion of the curriculum, and the lowering of expectations. The ACEI believes that no standardized testing should occur through grade 2, and questions the need for testing in the remaining elementary school years. Teachers increasingly indicate that they can address accountability issues through documentation of children's work. This is most clearly seen in the area of writing. Concerned educators argue that writing cannot be assessed outside the instructional process itself. The digest concludes that performance-based assessment in the classroom, rather than assessment by standardized testing, guarantees an understanding of the growth of individual children. Three references are cited. (BC)

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education
University of Illinois
805 West Pennsylvania Avenue
Urbana, Illinois 61801
(217) 333-1386

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On Standardized Testing

Vito Perrone

In 1976, ACEI issued a position paper calling for a moratorium on standardized testing in the early years of school (ACEI and Perrone). Although pressure to test continued in the late 1970s, there was also vigorous debate about negative effects of testing. Support for more authentic forms of assessment, rooted in close observation and systematic documentation of children's learning, became more common. But in 1983, after the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, the climate changed dramatically. Testing programs expanded greatly, especially in kindergarten and primary grades. The results have been deleterious, particularly for poor and minority children.

While standardized tests are problematic at all ages and levels of schooling, they are especially questionable in primary grades. In these years, children's growth is most uneven, and in large measure idiosyncratic. Skills needed for school success are in their most fluid stages. Implications of failure in these years can be devastating. A moratorium is more necessary now than it was in 1976. It is time for teachers, school administrators and parents to say more forcefully than ever that testing in the primary years must end and testing thereafter must be reduced.

Some Hard Questions about Standardized Testing

How many of us really believe that a child's intelligence, achievement, and competence can be represented adequately by standardized tests? Do we believe that any distribution curve is capable of classifying all children? Such beliefs would defy almost everything we understand about children's growth and responses to educational encounters. Upon reflection, few teachers and parents would accept that a single test score can define any child.

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The composition of a test can be examined with such questions as: Are the questions clear? Do they address the educational concerns of teachers or parents? Do they provide useful information about individual children or a class? That teachers and parents can offer so few positive responses to these questions surely suggests problems with the tests and the emphasis placed on them.

In contrast, almost all teachers respond affirmatively to the following questions: Do you feel any pressure to teach to the tests? If the test were not given, would you use fewer skill sheets, workbooks and other simple response pedagogical materials? The tests clearly limit educational possibilities for children.

The Tests and Their Uses

While many of the prekindergarten tests are of the paper and pencil variety, most have a more individual, performance-oriented quality. Results of these "screening" tests are often the basis for cautioning parents to "wait another year before starting your child in kindergarten." They are also used as a means of "early identification" of individuals who need special assistance, according to the preschool screeners. Although there is scant evidence that such early screening is beneficial, it has become almost universal.

Children typically receive their first paper and pencil test, which ostensibly gauges reading readiness, in kindergarten. Those who score in the bottom quartile are encouraged or required to spend another year in kindergarten, or are placed in a K-1 transitional setting that often leads to later retention. The rationale is that children benefit from the knowledge teachers gain from the test. Yet, teachers gain little important knowledge from such tests.

The tests used in the majority of school districts have expanded in their purposes. For example, children's scores now determine whether they will be placed in a gifted and talented program or become eligible for special tutoring. Results of annual achievement tests also determine eligibility for enrichment programs, special classes, and the like. Tests are used to determine a student's academic level. They become the basis for early tracking and then ongoing tracking. In recent years, test results have been increasingly used to determine whether a child should advance from one grade to another.

If tests play a significant role in grade advancement or are the primary basis for a school's so-called accountability, teachers feel compelled to spend considerable time preparing children to take the tests. In such cases, the tests become the school curriculum. Preparation usually begins many weeks before actual testing. During this period, two to three hours a day are often devoted to practicing tests and related exercises, all alien to the ongoing instruction and the usual student response patterns. Teachers readily acknowledge that questions in the practice exercises, which are similar to those on the real test, are trivial.

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Moreover, the possible responses contain words that children likely have never seen and certainly don't use. By the time the three days of real testing are over, weeks, sometimes months, have passed. Time for real books has been sacrificed for time spent reading isolated paragraphs and answering multiple-choice questions. Time has been spent not on posing problems for which math might be used, and in the process coming to a natural understanding of math concepts, but on reviewing skills such as addition, subtraction, and division—all in isolation.

Reasons for caution in the use of tests include the possible loss of children's self-esteem; the distortion of curriculum, teaching and learning; and the lowering of expectations. Other concerns relate to the tests themselves. For example, tests used in grades 1 and 2 are different from those used in grades 3-6. The early tests depend on pictures and vocabulary, while later tests place greater stress on content. Consequently, high scores in early testing may not carry over to later testing.

Because tests include diverse subject areas, they may or may not relate directly to what children have been taught or evoke children's interest. In addition, the multiple-choice format of standardized tests confuses many children who are not accustomed to it. Children who have been routinely encouraged to be cooperative learners are forbidden to talk during testing. Children who have been taught to work problems out slowly are told speed is essential.

When children are labeled *unready* or *slow learners* because of standardized test results, their educational opportunities generally become narrow and unchallenging. One-dimensional tasks such as those found in skill sheets and drills figure prominently in these children's education. A high proportion of the children in special education and lower-level tracks come from lower socioeconomic populations, including large numbers of minorities.

ACEI strongly believes that no standardized testing should occur in the preschool and K-2 years. Further, ACEI strongly questions the need for testing every child in the remainder of the elementary years. The National Commission on Testing and Public Policy recently reached the same position. The National Association for the Education of Young Children has also called for an end to K-2 testing.

Centrality of the Teacher in Classroom-Based Assessment

Increasingly, teachers are making it clear that they know how to address accountability issues through good documentation of children's actual work. One sees the result most clearly in the area of writing, which represents the most serious break yet in the power of standardized testing. Those concerned about writing in the schools argue convincingly that writing cannot be assessed with validity outside the instructional process and that writing to a real audience is central. Further, they assert that writing at its best is not easily standardized in current psychometric or technological terms. An understanding of a child's writing cannot begin with one task, a single piece of work, or writing that has not been completed within the norms of classroom practice. Such writing isn't likely to bring forth the student's most committed efforts.

An understanding of children's writing leads educators to carefully organized classroom documentation. For example, teachers systematically preserve copies of both drafts and finished pieces of a student's writing. Two or three pieces a month provide a reasonable collection. Periodic review of this writing informs a teacher's ongoing efforts to help particular students. At year's end, the chronologically organized accumulation is subjected to a careful review, with some of the following questions serving as a framework: What are the salient features and dominant motifs of the work? How much invention does it show? What connections to academic and social strengths are in evidence? How much diversity of word use is there?

Conclusion

The classroom setting and the teacher are central to an assessment program that is rooted in carefully organized and considered documentation. Authentic, performance-based assessment guarantees an increased understanding of the growth of individual children. Such an understanding reduces the need for currently used standardized testing programs.

All testing of young children in preschool and grades K-2 and the practice of testing every child in the later elementary years should cease. To continue such testing in the face of so much evidence of its deleterious effects is the height of irresponsibility.

This digest was adapted from a position paper of the Association for Childhood Education International by Vito Perrone, "On Standardized Testing," which appeared in *Childhood Education* (Spring, 1991): 132-142.

For More Information

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